

**Opening Statement for Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“Closing the Digital Divide: Overseeing Federal Funds for Broadband
Deployment”
May 10, 2023**

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Thank you, Chair Griffith.

The Internet provides Americans with the opportunity to earn a living, complete a degree, or receive vital telehealth services.

However, as many of my constituents in rural Eastern Washington unfortunately know, millions of Americans still lack access to this essential service.

I think about all the excitement around 5G but I have constituents who tell me they'd be grateful for any sort of connection at all.

Supporting broadband access across our country's large geographic area populated by diverse communities with varying needs is no simple task.

Millions of Americans still lack access to fixed broadband services, despite our federal government spending tens of billions of dollars on broadband-related programs over the years. This indicates we need to do better -- and we have opportunities for improvement.

SIGNIFICANT FEDERAL INVESTMENT

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act or “I-I-J-A” alone appropriated nearly \$65 billion for broadband deployment and adoption.

This is on top of about \$8 billion spent annually by the FCC through the Universal Service Fund for similar purposes.

In March, this subcommittee heard from the Department of Commerce's Inspector General Peg Gustafson...

... and we learned more about the Office of the Inspector General's plans for overseeing IIJA implementation and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's use of the \$48 billion it received to implement five broadband programs.

But NTIA is only one of several federal agencies that administer broadband programs. Federal broadband programming is scattered across more than 100 programs at 15 different agencies.

INEFFICIENCIES IN FEDERAL PROGRAMMING

Unsurprisingly, when GAO inventoried the dozens of federal broadband programs for its May 2022 report, it found that fragmentation, overlap, and potential duplication hinder these programs.

Today, we hope to learn more about how the government can better manage and better coordinate the agency components that are supposed to be increasing access to broadband services, such as infrastructure planning, affordability, proper devices, and building digital skills.

We must also explore how the government can avoid "overbuilding," or wasteful and duplicative deployment in the same area for the same recipients.

This includes making sure the Federal Communications Commission's new broadband maps are accurate and used by all federal agencies when making funding decisions.

MAXIMIZING RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Rather than simply assuming the solution is spending more money and standing up new programs, we need to step back and take a hard look at how we've spent the funds we've already invested and what lessons we can learn.

We also plan to learn more about the challenges stakeholders have faced in navigating multiple federal programs and employing them in a

complementary manner. From inconsistent program requirements to complicated permitting processes—we need to reduce the burdens to deployment.

I am grateful to our witnesses for sharing their research and experience with us. Assessing dozens of programs and identifying opportunities to harmonize them can be challenging, but it is necessary to maximize our return on investment and ensure taxpayer dollars are spent with accountability.

Surely, we all share the goal of closing the digital divide in the fastest, most efficient, and effective way possible.

LACK OF LEADERSHIP

According to GAO, **no national strategy exists** to coordinate and guide federal broadband efforts. Staff from the Executive Office of the President told GAO that they are considering whether such a strategy is needed.

GAO has concluded that without a national strategy, federal broadband activities will not be fully coordinated and continue to be at risk of overlap and duplication.

Energy and Commerce has previously acted in a bipartisan way to ensure more coordination across federal agencies by enacting the ACCESS BROADBAND Act in 2020, which tasked the NTIA with tracking and coordinating all federal broadband programs.

As the principal advisor to the president on telecommunications policies, it is NTIA's job to guide and coordinate the federal government's effort to close the digital divide.

Whether it's the programs at the NTIA, FCC, USDA, Treasury, DOT, or several other agencies, it's extremely important that NTIA ensure the efficient use of finite federal resources to close the digital divide once and for all.

We hope to hear more about GAO's conversations with the administration regarding its implementation of their recommendations and about how this

Committee can assist through additional policies to empower the NTIA to coordinate federal broadband deployment efforts.

CONCLUSION

I look forward to our discussion today, and I thank our witnesses for being here today.